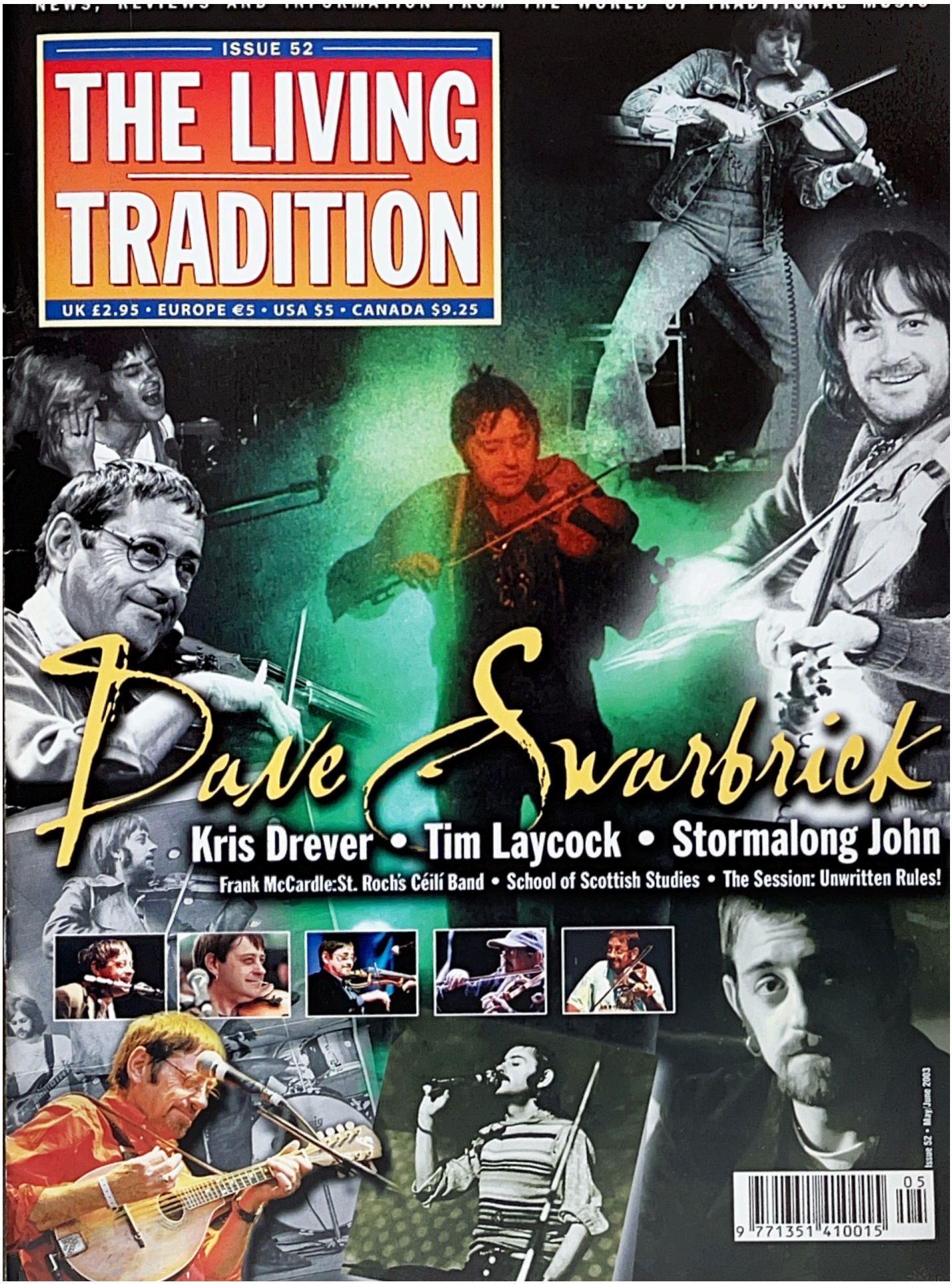
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by Dan Milner

STORMALONG JOHN

The Lancaster Maritime Festival, held every year at Easter, is called 'the world's biggest gathering of sea song and shanty singers and the description is entirely true. After singing maritime songs for more than 40 years each, Bob Conroy and I went there for first time in 1999. Booked as the American guests, we were ready for anything really but really didn't know what to expect.

The first friendly face we saw belonged to Louis Killen. Lou has lived in the United States longer than most natives but, whether his body be in Lancaster or Los Angeles, his spirit is always on Tyneside. Next we came across Cyril Tawney and Johnny Collins & Jim Mageean who had sung at our folk club in New York 20 years earlier. But, apart from those few fine 'nightingales', we neither knew – nor knew of – anyone else on the programme. That put us in a unique position and, with keen curiosity and all of maritime Britain as our oyster, we set out in search of pearls. Clearly, among the brightest we found were Stormalong John of Liverpool, seven strong singers with a wall of sound chorus and two driving concertinas.

It was Tony Davis of the Spinners who gathered a bunch of Merseyside folksingers to sing shanties at the first-ever International Garden Festival to take place in the UK. That was in 1984. (Only in Liverpool could maritime work songs be sung at a garden party!) Soon afterwards, Stormalong John were asked to sing on Granada Television and then at the Merseyside Maritime Museum. They continue at the museum, averaging up to a dozen Sunday afternoon concerts each year... 'vocal exhibits', they call themselves. The first group had 12 members. Five originals remain today: Arthur Garnett, Charlie Scott, Harry Lowrey, Jack Coutts and Tony Molyneux. Bill Jones and Mark Garnett have since replaced some of the earlier singers.

"Worse was when we were sure we knew his version only to find we'd got one word wrong and he'd bellow – 'No, it's ACROSS the plains of Mexico, you useless ...'"

The Stormies first travelled abroad in 1987 when they were invited to Krakow. They now perform more overseas – Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Norway, Poland and Sweden – than in Britain. Last year they sang in Venice, home of Vivaldi! Arthur Garnett told me their most unusual venue was the Delta nightclub in Bremerhaven. 'When we arrived we couldn't believe that we had been booked there. The owner was a millionaire named Klaus Luka and he said, "Don't worry, I know my customers." He was right. The audience went wil and so did we... a great night.'

Because Stormalong John are extremely popular performers at many European festivals,

it's surprising how little known they are in Britain beyond maritime music circles. Tony Molyneux explained that "In Europe, Stormalong John have become ambassadors of a sort for Liverpool. Our lively songs and delivery give a positive slant on our culture and, since most Continental audiences are more demonstrative than their British counterparts, it's good for our egos!" Tony feels "there's a greater willingness in Europe to appreciate a wider range of music. In Britain, we compartmentalise too much and the broadcast and print media give folk music very little exposure. When they do, it's often negative. The fact is that Britons often belittle traditional dance and song activity." Most of the group prefer singing abroad with Brittany a particular favourite. Arthur likes Brest with audience crowds of up to 10,000 and Harry loves Paimpol for its magnificent setting.

Ask Stormalong John who are their favourite singers and you get many different answers. Arthur quickly singles out Louis Killen and calls Shay Black, an original member of the group - prior to emigrating to California in 1984 - the finest singer with whom he's sung. Harry mentions Dick Gaughan, Keith Kendrick and, perhaps surprisingly, Kate Rusby. Others speak highly of Shanty Jack, with whom Stormalong John have recorded.

Hearing how Mark Garnett relates to shanties was particularly interesting. As youngest member of the group, he likens shanties to punk rock pointing out the often 'angry, insistent rhythm which drives them'. But, just like the others, he looks upon singing maritime songs as an opportunity to get into the minds of the hard-driven seamen who sang shanties while working aboard tall ships.

The group credit the late Stan Hugill as most influential in forming the Stormies' musical approach. Tony says, "Stan Hugill was my eye opener... the real thing... the last link with shantying!" Jack Coutts recalls first seeing Hugill at a maritime festival organised by Stan Ambrose of BBC Radio Merseyside in the early 1980's. "He had an amazingly powerful presence and I remember being struck by the vigour and energy that he put into his shanties. Like most of the audience I'd got into the folk club habit of dragging out the lines so we could all revel in the harmonies. Here was this old man belting through them out with a clipped, staccato delivery, sometimes playing free and easy with the rhythms but never letting the pace drop. And, of course, when he talked about the songs you realised that these weren't meant for leisurely entertainment, they were the accompaniment for hard graft. I think it must have been in '85 or '86 that we first got a chance to sing with Stan. It was more than a bit daunting. We were backing the greatest living authority and performer of the repertoire – a living piece of history, you might say."

Stan Hugill's masterwork, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, contains numerous versions of some songs and he really knew them all as Stormalong John were to find out. Jack recalls, "He would ask us if we knew a particular shanty; we'd say 'yes'; then he'd launch into a version we'd never heard before. Worse was when we were sure we knew his version only to find we'd got one word wrong and he'd bellow – 'No, it's *ACROSS* the plains of Mexico, you useless ...'"

Stormalong John were studying for a degree at the University of Hard Knocks, Stan Hugill's own *alma mater*, and the tutelage they got was no different than that their master had received.

The Stormies learned their lessons well and, over time, they came to know Stan's strengths, foibles and preferences. The last time they sang with him was at his 85th birthday celebration in Aberdovey in November 1991. Stan Ambrose recorded the singing session they had in the hotel lounge. Sadly, Stan Hugill died soon afterwards. Although he had only a few months to live, he sounds robust and lively. Obviously, Stan was totally at home in the company of his favorite crew. In view of its historical importance, that last recording was recently released on CD.

Stormalong John also have three CDs on their own, including the highly acclaimed disc 'Liverpool' which is well worth acquiring. Taught by the last true deepwater shantyman, they are Liverpool men who sing the songs of their city's great maritime heritage with strongly traditional style. ❑

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